

# Integrating Standardized Tests into University Level English Classes

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# Integrating Standardized Tests into University Level English Classes

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## I. Introduction

Standardized Tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL are having more of an impact on university level English students in Japan. Although these tests themselves are not the objectives of teaching/learning English, many schools have begun adopting courses, which help students prepare for such tests.

TOEIC is being used as a tool to measure the English levels of nonnative English-speakers as this test is claimed to be, “a global standard for the assessment of communicative English ability (<http://www.ets.org/toEIC/>).” In fact, this test consists of situations in various settings in daily life and in the business world. TOEFL is an academic English proficiency test, which is often required as an admission requirement to colleges and universities in North America (<http://www.ets.org/toefl/index.html>). TOEFL includes a wide range of subject matter, from botany to sociology. It has been pointed out by Wadden that examinees need basic knowledge in liberal arts in order to obtain high scores (2003).

Some educators are against establishing specialized courses for standardized test preparation, saying that colleges and universities are not preparatory schools, which are supposed to teach test taking techniques. However, it makes sense to integrate test conscious activities for several reasons. First, such tests are believed to have validity and reliability; therefore, teachers can use them as language proficiency assessment tools. Second, a student can measure his or her own advancement by taking tests repeatedly. Moreover, such tests serve as short-term goals for students; in other words, tests can motivate students to study English.

In this paper, language proficiency of students at a Japanese university is described first. Then, TOEIC and TOEFL test items are reviewed and discussed in detail. Lastly, suggestions to overcome weaknesses of the students are presented.

## **II. Student Proficiency Analysis**

Student performances were characterized by two methods: classroom observation and IP TOEIC exams.

### **1) Classroom Observation**

I have been using various TOEIC and TOEFL preparation materials in teaching students English at a university in Tokyo. At this university, first year students and second year students have one English class per week respectively. The syllabus includes TOEIC and TOEFL preparation activities which were developed and adapted to suit the needs and levels of these students.

Through classroom observation, I have noticed some common characteristics of the students' language proficiency. First, it was noticed that the students lack vocabulary, especially regarding unfamiliar themes such as business, finance, history, and travel. Students generally do not know such terms as; CEO, checking/savings account, decaffeinated coffee, senior citizens, nor supreme unleaded. Japanese university students have limited vocabularies in these topics, and as a result, they struggle to comprehend both written and spoken discourses.

Second, especially in test reading sections, students are overwhelmed by the volume of the content and by time limitations. In TOEFL, it was found that the passages were longer than what students usually read in their other university classes. Especially, CBT testing requires deep concentration and memorization of content, which further maximizes the pressure of having to read lengthy passages rapidly in a short time. One student who took the TOEFL test told me that she would have been able to solve all of the problems if she had had more time.

The third problematic area for Japanese university students is that

students are not familiar with pronunciation and stress patterns of English words. For example, many students have difficulty identifying and pronouncing the following words in which the underlined sounds are omitted, shortened or changed in the natural speed.

deep pond

meet you

bless you

should have (should've)

Is tax included in the price?

Why did you hire an accountant?

In addition, some *katakana* words (borrowed words from foreign languages) such as *kamera* for camera, *banira* for vanilla, *tonneru* for tunnel confuse students in both listening and speaking. When students practiced dictation, many of them failed to catch these words and understand the sentences, mainly because many sounds were unrecognizable to them.

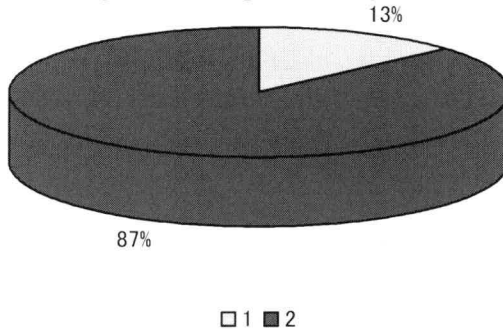
## 2) IP TOEIC Exam

When university students begin hunting for jobs, they find that companies often require high TOEIC scores as a recruitment criterion. Having a high TOEIC score will give a candidate a great advantage. Therefore, students are encouraged to take TOEIC before they begin to hunt for jobs. In 2003, two IP tests were conducted at the university. The average score of these two IP tests was approximately 500.

Interestingly, according to the results of the last two tests, most students scored higher in the listening section than in the reading section. There has been a belief that Japanese learners of English would perform better in reading tests than in listening tests, though recent results are contrary. As shown in Graph 1, 87% of the students scored higher in listening than in reading. The average score in the reading section was 268, and that of listening section was 229.

These results indicate that not only listening, but also reading skills and grammar should be taught to help students improve their overall

Graph 1: Listening vs. Reading in TOEIC Scores



1=students who scored higher in reading than in listening  
 2=students who scored lower in reading than in listening

communicative language proficiency. After taking such tests, some students commented that they should have reviewed their basic grammatical knowledge beforehand. Teachers should be reminded of the importance of teaching grammar and reading comprehension.

### III. Analysis of Test Items

It was not possible to obtain original standardized tests items; therefore, I used materials, which were developed to prepare learners for these tests. Having analyzed TOEIC and TOEFL test items, I found that students need more cultural background knowledge and they need to have more experience in critical thinking.

#### 1) Cultural Background Knowledge

In the TOEIC exercise book, *Successful Steps for the TOEIC Test*, the chapters are sequenced around themes such as entertainment, personnel, office work and supplies, and so forth (Oga, 2004). In one chapter entitled, "Let's get together," the following dialogue appears. The task is to find the best response to the question.

What are you going to bring for the potluck next Sunday?  
 (A) I really need a good pot.

- (B) It's Sunday, isn't it?
- (C) I think I'll make salad. (p. 114)

In this item, the word "potluck" holds a vital clue. Without knowing what this term means, it would be difficult to come up with the correct answer. Here is another excerpt:

A: Sir, you can take only two pieces of luggage as carry-on.

B: But I have some important documents in them.

A: Sorry, but I don't make rules.

Question: Why does the man want to carry on all the luggage? (p. 126)

In this dialogue, there are obstacles related to certain background knowledge. First, this item will be easy if students have traveled on the plane, and therefore are able to depict what is going on in this dialogue. However, without such an experience, it might be difficult to imagine what "carry-on" means. A further difficulty lies in the third statement which may be a bureaucratic reaction seen in North American Society.

## 2) Critical Thinking

In TOEIC and TOEFL listening sections, words and phrases are often paraphrased, which require test-takers to think critically. Here is an excerpt of a job interview, as a TOEFL sample listening test item (Tashiro, 1998).

Woman: Well, you have plenty of experience with the written word, but you do seem to move around a lot. May I ask why?

Man: The grass is always greener, isn't it? No. Seriously. I wanted to get as much experience as I could, and I couldn't get that working with just one kind of publication, could I?

Woman: Is that why you want to leave your present job?

Man: That's part of it, but the main reason is that I know I'm not going anywhere there. I've gone as far as I can.

Woman: Fair enough answer.

Question: What is the main reason the man wants to leave his present job?

- (A) He is going to be fired.
- (B) He has no prospect of advancement
- (C) He could make more money with the new job.
- (D) He wants to try something different. (pp. 33–34)

As shown above, there is no direct restatement or repetition as to why this person wants a new job. There is also a confusing metaphor about green grass, which requires test-takers to try to imagine what this person really means. While listening, students also need to pay attention to intonation and to the tone of the speakers, in order to answer the question correctly.

Reading sections in TOEFL involve indirect questions. Passages are accompanied by a series of questions; main point questions, comprehension questions, small detail questions, and inferential questions. In the inferential questions, test-takers are to make inference about the content. Typical indirect questions are:

It can be inferred from the passage that...

It is most likely that...

What does the first paragraph probably discuss?

As seen in the third sentence, knowledge of paragraph and organization of academic arguments are required as well.

In the next generation TOEFL, which will begin in September 2005, test-takers will need to compare two passages and combine listening, reading, and speaking skills. (<http://www.ets.org/toefl/>) I predict that TOEFL will be even more challenging for non-native speakers of English, because new test patterns will demand not only integrated language skills, but also multi-phase psychological steps such as conceptualization and abstraction.

#### IV. Suggested Classroom Activities

So far, I have tried to sketch the language proficiency of Japanese university students and, I have analyzed some of the problematic areas of the standardized tests that the students might encounter. Based on these discussions, I would like to suggest some activities, which may help students overcome some difficulties.

##### 1) Enhancing Cultural Background Knowledge

Cultural background knowledge can be taught in two ways. First, students should build up vocabulary, which is culturally loaded. Here are two examples:

1. She works on a ranch.
2. The car-pooling regulation became effective as of September.

The underlined words reflect the lives and customs of people living in North America. Students may need to look up such terms in a dictionary or have them explained by a teacher. Students should be encouraged to create their own thesaurus and vocabulary lists. Use of an English-English dictionary, instead of an English-Japanese bilingual dictionary, is highly recommended, since students should also learn synonyms, connotation and usage. Recently, numerous commercial publications, which focus on vocabulary building and test taking techniques, can be found. (Sakurai, 1993; Osanai, 2004)

If time permits, students should study not only vocabulary, but also reading material covering various topics. Especially in TOEFL, students would earn higher scores if they had a more profound basic knowledge of American culture, sociology, history and so forth. Some preparation materials on the market include information on Native Americans, Colonial History, and Post-Civil War History, which would benefit students, not only in test taking, but would also serve as a foundation in other liberal arts subjects (Wadden, 2001).



In the third place, pragmatics should be dealt with in listening and reading activities. As an example, here is a dialogue from the TOEIC preparation manual by Oga:

Brrr, it's freezing in here! Is the heater on?

- (A) Let me turn it up.
- (B) Let me turn it off.
- (C) Let me turn it down. (p. 40)

In this dialogue, the underlined sentence does not require a simply yes or no answer; instead, it serves as a request. Test-takers need to infer what the speaker is trying to express. As a classroom activity, students can paraphrase the conversation, changing it to a more direct utterance. Students can role play the conversation. Another activity is to guess the response before they hear the answer. Students can also discuss the similarities and differences of correct answers and responses, which would be culturally appropriate in Japan. Depending on the students' levels, teachers can adopt and adapt activities to enhance pragmatic competence of the students.

## 2) Promoting Critical Thinking

Related to pragmatic proficiency mentioned just previously, I would like to point out that students should learn how to read and listen critically. The purpose of training students to think critically is not only to help them succeed in standardized tests; critical thinking is also an important step in becoming a better communicator and an independent thinker.

Generally speaking, Japanese university students are not adept at reading critically even in their own mother tongues. One possible explanation for this shortcoming is that this phenomenon is part of the hidden agenda of Japanese elementary school and high school language educators in Japan. The agenda is to teach ethics, or dotoku through the Japanese curriculum (Fujiwara, 2003). Textbooks might be trying to teach students only about how to work hard for the society in which they

live. Fujiwara states that Japanese language textbooks present mainly stories of virtue and that there wasn't room for criticizing or arguing content.

Taking such background into consideration, teachers have to attempt to open the eyes of their students. An example of a classroom activity for novice critical thinkers would be to read newspaper articles. In this activity, students would be asked to read two or three articles on the same topic. Students of a lower level or of an intermediate level could be asked to compare a Japanese article with an English article on the same topic. Students should be instructed to read carefully, and then compare and contrast the tone, message, and intention of the editors. Advanced students could be asked to search for two or more related articles, and to analyze them in terms of underlying assumptions and biases. Through this activity, students would realize that such articles generally reflect the writer's point of view and include personal opinions.

After introducing the idea of critical reading, teachers may turn to TOEIC and TOEFL exercises. Here is a citation item from New Generation TOEFL (Educational Testing Service, 2004).

The nineteenth century brought with it a burst of new discoveries and made lighting available to all. In the early-to-mid nineteenth century, a process was developed to refine tallow (fat from animals) with alkali and sulfuric acid. The result was a product called stearin. Stearin is harder and burns longer than unrefined tallow. This breakthrough meant that it was possible to make tallow candles that would not produce the usual smoke and rancid odor. Stearins were also derived from palm oils, so vegetable waxes as well as animal fats could be used to make candles...

Which of the following can be inferred from paragraph 1 about candles before the nineteenth century?

- (A) They did not smoke when they were burned.
- (B) They produce a pleasant odor as they burned.
- (C) They were not available to all.

(D) They contained sulfuric acid. (p. 113)

There are many factors involved in this test item; first, minimal vocabulary is indispensable. For instance, it is crucial to know the words, “discoveries,” “available,” “developed,” and “breakthrough.” Otherwise, this passage would not make any sense. Second, readers need to differentiate function words and minor words. They should not waste their test time, trapped by minor words. Then, they have to read the text very carefully, examining the implication of each sentence.

## V. Conclusion

In this paper, language proficiency of Japanese university students has been discussed. It was pointed out that Japanese students had limited vocabularies which would be covered in the standardized tests. They needed to have more practice of reading English texts rapidly. They had difficulties in recognizing omitted, changed, and shortened sounds of English words. In addition, it was found that grammar knowledge should be reinforced.

After standardized tests were analyzed in terms of their difficulties, some activities have been suggested to help students overcome their weaknesses especially from two perspectives: enhancement of cultural background knowledge and promotion of critical thinking.

In EFL classroom settings, it is often difficult to find samples of authentic English usage that can be incorporated into English lessons. As a solution, standardized test items could be used. This would also serve as a valuable resource of authentic language usage. By adopting appropriate test items, which meet the needs and levels of the students, teachers could facilitate communicative language skills, and enhance the cultural awareness and critical thinking skills of their students.

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